



# New Zealand? .... or 'No-Zealand'!

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*A cruise ship calls at the multi-purpose Port of Lyttelton, New Zealand. Photo credit: Athithan Vignakaran*

It is a sad reality for the shipping industry in New Zealand that a combination of increasing costs and Government restrictions are changing the nature of the country to “No-Zealand” in the eyes of ship operators, owners and agents.

New Zealand is in danger of pricing itself out of the market for international shipping. For a country which relies on shipping for the carriage of over 99 percent of our exports by volume, we are becoming one that shipowners and operators see as a high cost drain on their profitability.

Cargo owners agree. They are concerned at the costs of doing business through our ports. International carriers and cruise lines have the same view.

It must be remembered that we are geographically isolated and remote from the main trading routes, so our trading livelihood depends on attracting ship operators here.

The fear is that some operators will review whether it is worthwhile serving our shores, given the ever-increasing plethora of obstacles put in their way. New Zealand will always have trade, but a growing concern is of pushing away good responsible owners and the implications that come with that for our country and our environment.

**Those obstacles include rising port prices, poor port productivity, increasing Government fees, stringent biosecurity rules and unrealistic visa requirements for ships’ crews.**

Port pricing and poor productivity have been highlighted by New Zealand’s major exporters and importers. They tell the market that “New Zealand Inc” suffers because our port costs are going up while port productivity is either going down or stalling. Recent submissions to Parliament’s Transport and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into our ports and the maritime sector revealed the extent of the cargo owners’ concerns.

Carriers themselves used the Parliamentary inquiry to emphasise how productivity has declined. They were scathing.

The International Container Lines Committee, representing the deep-sea lines, used Ministry of Transport statistics to compare 2019 Q1 as a base year with Q1 2025. Cargo moving in and out of our ports declined by nearly 4%. -- we are handling less tradeable cargo overall than in 2019.

ICLC reviewed the productivity in our four main container ports accounting for about 85% of our total volume throughput. Their “ship rate” (the number

of containers moved on and off a ship per hour across all cranes) has reduced from 68 moves per hour to 55.

“This represents as much as 250 moves less per 24-hour period on every vessel working in New Zealand at any one time. This is close to a 20% reduction in productivity and is very concerning,” says the ICLC.

The lines warn that productivity must be lifted across all ports and through the whole supply chain to support economic growth – “Right now, the reality is that we are going backwards”.

The threat of “No-Zealand” is real. Last year, a Maersk representative warned that New Zealand has become a relatively high-cost country for international shipping lines to service, saying: “Lines need to optimise profitability within their fleets –it is crucial to keep an efficient supply chain to mitigate rising costs. Optimising the performance of the port network is essential for a robust supply chain infrastructure.”

So, if container lines can make more money by deploying vessels away from New Zealand, it makes commercial sense to do so.

## Government Fees and Biosecurity

More than container lines who have these fears. Shipping agents know that bulk operators view steep Government fee increases as a barrier here.

An example of the Bureaucracy's view of applying costs to ship operators is the newly-introduced Commercial Vessel Fee (in place from 1 April 2026) – a cost of NZD4679 + GST for every commercial vessel entering New Zealand, payable at first New Zealand port.

Shipping New Zealand, representing some international bulk operators, container lines shipping agents and other service providers around our ports, strenuously opposed this and other increases. Our view is that higher border charges in the maritime sector are being passed back to the New Zealand importer and ultimately the taxpayer in the goods they purchase (likely at a much higher rate considering all the administrative costs involved in handling this new fee). Government consultation was poorly managed and the concerns of the payers of this fee were ignored. The outcome appeared preconceived.

In addition, MPI have been trying to implement changes to the Biosecurity Act which would give them greater powers in dictating where vessels can clean between the 12nm zone of NZ territorial waters and the 200nm EEZ, with no evidence provided as to any damage being caused by commercial shipping in this area. Another unnecessary battle for shipping operators to face in bringing ships to New Zealand. Again, there was significant rejection from the wider industry to this change, and we wonder why it was even suggested in the first place when there was already industry concern on the current settings. At the time of writing, it has been advised that this will not be implemented (for now).

Cruise line operators are equally concerned about rising port costs, Government fees and biofouling rules. They say New Zealand is now the most expensive region for them to visit, and

they are looking elsewhere. We are already seeing a significant decrease of cruise ships calling New Zealand and this trend seems likely to continue for the next few years at least.

New Zealand Cruise Association says biofouling risk, uncertainty, cost and perception make it impossible for lines to confidently predict a ship will be allowed to enter New Zealand. The brand risk and operational cost is unacceptable to many lines. New regulations and costs being introduced inside the booking window (18-24 months) create unmanageable planning and budgeting risks.

## Visa Rules

Then there is the long-standing crew visa issue.

For years, shipping agents have asked the NZ Government to revise the 28-day visa rule for visiting seafarers. Every year, several bulk vessels get caught because of having to discharge and load at several ports while having to queue for berths at congested ports.

Agents must apply for extensions for the crews' visas when the ships exceed 28 days on the coast. It might cost about NZ\$30,000+ each time and is a complete waste of money because most ships have moved off the NZ coast within 35 days.

It was recommended by Government that Shipping NZ work in with the Shipping Federation (representing NZ domestic carriers), who in the past had been nervous about a possible change. The two organisations met and came up with an agreement that recommended some flexibility in the visa requirements for crews caught by the current rule.

The joint suggestion went to Immigration Minister Erica Stanford. She knocked it back, saying that only approximately 1% of cases go over the deemed visa period. Our understanding that this Government regulation is not entirely difficult to change (or extend), it is just a willingness from our government to address this long-standing issue.

What that fails to understand is the 1% are mostly in the bulk shipping sector, representing a higher percentage there. Also, with bulk ships having multiple agents for different cargoes into and out of New Zealand, are all the ships required to meet this rule meeting it? Bulk ships transport our fuel and essential agricultural products to support our meat and dairy industries and carry our export logs outbound. It is a genuine problem that Government continues to ignore.

Shipping New Zealand has raised this issue with various Immigration Ministers for several years, yet they continue to dismiss the importance of the issue to our sector. I can't see why the Government would not agree to a joint proposal from Shipping NZ and the Federation that would reduce costs - where's the downside when both sides agree?

The bulk and container sectors are the most common sectors for overstaying their 28 days due to port productivity delays during their voyages, so it is a double whammy with international shipping lines footing the bill for New Zealand's poor performance and inflexible visa regulations.

New Zealand is now among the most expensive places in the world for any ship to visit. We are seen as difficult to work with, unwelcoming and unpredictable.

It appears that many sectors of the shipping and supply chain see things that the Government isn't seeing. We need to arrest our cost base and improve our port productivity. Because if we don't, our trading future will be decided not by the New Zealand Government, but by the heads of shipping lines elsewhere who are not focused on New Zealand beating its economic woes.

For a country so heavily reliant on trade, it seems very odd that there is not a positive focus in this area.

New Zealand must rid itself of the "No-Zealand" tag, and quickly. ▲